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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

From Women to Women: The Portrayal of  
Violence Against Women in *A Streetcar Named  
Desire* and *Flyin' West*

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## ABSTRACT [EN]

This essay deals with the analysis of characters in two North American plays, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*, and attempts to analyze their response towards the gender violence they are subjected to. Both plays reflect the mentality of the times they were published in, 1947 and 1995 respectively. The first one is significant for its portrayal of patriarchy while the second one is more orientated towards demonstrating struggles based on gender and race and the importance of solidarity among women as a force field against patriarchy. Coinciding with two different waves of feminism both plays illustrate two reactions against violence which differ strongly from each other; the former deals with the helplessness of the woman's situations in marriage and her ultimate submission to her male victimizer while the latter shows the collective courage of women and their active engagement in order to free a woman from her abusive husband. With these two different kinds of approach towards gender violence, the authors of both plays try to make the readers conscious about the importance of gender equality in order for women to break out of the patriarchal chains and be free thinking and independent individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism, gender violence, North American theatre, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Flyin' West*, women's reactions to violence.

## RESUMEN [ES]

En este ensayo trato de analizar los personajes de dos obras de teatro norteamericano: *A Streetcar Named Desire* de Tennessee Williams y *Flyin' West* de Pearl Cleage; teniendo en cuenta la actitud que muestran respecto a la violencia de género a la que están expuestos. Ambas obras reflejan la mentalidad de la época en la que son publicadas, en 1947 y 1995;

la primera más aferrada a la sociedad patriarcal, y la segunda más liberal respecto a los problemas y a la imagen de la mujer. Coincidiendo con dos movimientos feministas distintos, estas dos obras reflejan dos reacciones a la violencia de género completamente diferentes: la primera muestra la sumisión de la mujer respecto al hombre y la segunda muestra la valentía de la mujer para enfrentar una situación de violencia y lograr ser liberada de su opresor. Con estos dos finales los autores pretenden concienciar a todas las mujeres de la importancia que tiene rechazar una actitud machista para poder ser libre e independiente.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Feminismo, violencia de género, teatro norteamericano, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Flyin' West*, reacciones de la mujer a la violencia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have fought for gender equality attempting to break down oppressive patriarchal norms, such as subordination of women by men, their treatment as second-class citizens and the association of womanhood solely to her role as mothers and wives. However, it was not until the nineteenth Century that women joined for the first time in a women's movement (the Suffragette Women's Movement) to fight for their rights. This movement has been considered part of the First Wave of Feminism.

Though the perspectives have differed in each wave, women in all three Waves of Feminism have nonetheless raised their voices for women's rights against inequality, gender violence and racial discrimination. The First Wave, which started at the end of the nineteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth century, focused on attaining equality between women and men with regards to legal rights; the Second Wave dealt with social and political inequality between the two genders although it only took into account the concerns of middle-upper class white women; and finally, the Third Wave of Feminism, focused on gender violence and also dealt with the discrimination suffered by women of color.

The gradual increase in awareness regarding women's rights could be attributed to these three Waves of Feminism as well as the use of theatre as a medium for the same. In the plays, the authors illustrate violent situations of sexual and racial discrimination in order to expose the daily harassment suffered by women in society and thereby attempting to instigate a reaction and create awareness among the audience. Two notable examples of North American plays which deal with these feminist themes are Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and Pearl Cleage *Flyin' West* (1995). These two plays, though in different ways, deal with the theme of gender violence which is rightfully depicted as something deep-rooted within the patriarchal framework of society. Both plays

show female characters with distinct personalities as well as different methods and ways of addressing the issue of gender violence. The final *solution* given in the two plays vary vastly from each other and this could be due to the different time periods in which they were written –the publication of the first play was during the First Wave of Feminism while the second one coincided with the Third Wave. As aforementioned these two waves fought for women issues but differed in terms of perspectives and primary goals and motives.

In this paper I will discuss the three waves of feminism and the various causes, types and consequences of gender violence. I shall then proceed to analyze the different behavioral responses of the characters to the issue of gender violence in both plays, as per their personalities which could be broadly categorized into rebellious or submissive; and their attitude towards the type of violence they suffer, which are either gradual acceptance and tolerance or resistance and rejection.

## 1. The History of Feminism

Pearl Cleage claims that “women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, sexual, social, spiritual and economic” (qtd. by Collins 12). I use this quotation to begin my chapter on the history of feminism because Cleage’s definition of feminism makes no distinction between women of different races and classes. Her statement includes all women, white and non-white women, because all of them throughout history have fought for their right to equality with men and freedom from patriarchal oppression.

In this section I attempt to explain the three waves of feminism and the key reasons behind their materialization into crucial movements. Education, women’s rights, the right to vote and gender equality were the main agendas which gave rise to feminist movements. Furthermore, I will introduce Black Feminism because it is present as a subcategory in



these three waves. However, Black Feminism must be viewed in its own right because the term feminism as such varies from woman to woman depending on race, age, class or culture.

### 1.1. First Wave of Feminism.

This First Wave of Feminism took place during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, although it formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in New York, in 1848. During this period women focused on marriage, parenting and property rights. At the end of nineteenth century this feminist movement began to be related to the abolitionist movement, whose arguments were used by feminists to fight for human rights and equality in an attempt to end slavery. The abolitionist and women's rights movements brought together white and black women although the former, middle class white women, did not advocate the presence of the latter, poor black women, in the women's rights movement. I will explain this racial discrimination within the feminist movement in the forth section, which deals with Black Feminism. During the first decades of the twentieth century, at the end of the First Wave Feminism, the women's rights movement stuck together to the Suffragist Movement. For the women the right to vote became an important step towards being treated as more effective members of the society. In 1920, women in the United States achieved this goal and were enfranchised. However, despite of that, most white women voted as their male-counterparts did, without actually making an independent decision about their *own* choice.

### 1.2. Second Wave of Feminism

This movement took place during the second half of the XX century, between the 60s and 90s. This wave fought for social and political inequalities as opposed to the First Wave which was focused on the legal aspects between men and women. Some authors say

that the Second Wave began in United States with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); others mark the beginning in the years 1968/1969 when the Miss America Pageant was met with criticism because the feminists believed that its meaning was reduced to portraying women as mere objects of beauty as per the codified norms of patriarchy. This movement was more radical than the First Wave of Feminism and they claimed for freedom of expression of sexuality and reproductive rights, they also tried to deal with patriarchal oppression, capitalism and the role of women as wives and mothers. However, the Second Wave Feminists sought specifically the liberation of white upper-middle class women without taking into consideration the rights of colored women.

One radical organization during the Second Wave of Feminism was called Redstockings, founded in 1969. They believed that women were oppressed as a class and spread the idea of conscious-raising groups (C-R) and the slogan *Sisterhood is Powerful*. C-R groups were important for women because they gave the women a platform to interact with each other, shared their experiences and therefore provided solidarity and support to each other. It also helped in spreading awareness regarding what *patriarchy* really meant and how women were oppressed. Redstockings' women believed that sexual differences were more relevant than class and race differences. Once again, in spite of claiming that *Sisterhood is Powerful*, they did not take into account the experiences and concerns of the poor and colored women.

### 1.3.Third Wave of Feminism

This wave began in the mid-90s and is a mixture of different types of feminism, such as Grrrl-feminism, New Feminism, Multiracial Feminism and Postcolonial Feminism among others. This movement had "local, national and transnational activism in areas such as violence against women, trafficking, body surgery or self-mutilation" (*Three Waves of*

*Feminism, From Suffragettes to Grrrls* 17). Besides, the Third Wave of Feminism readopted elements that were considered oppressive by the First and the Second Wave feminists like lip-stick. Beauty products specially created for women were regarded as accessories that harmed women's self confidence, i.e. a woman is not worthy enough for a man and therefore must beautify herself. This trend of women altering themselves for men can be seen in the light of the Miss America Pageant in 1968/1969 as I have commented before. The whole notion of beauty becomes objectified through the patriarchal gaze of society. As Martha Rampton claims in her article, Pinkfloor expressed that "it is possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time" ("The Three Waves of Feminism.").

In this period women fought for further changes in stereotypes and the kind of language used to define them. Certain achievements made in the Second Wave, such as access to contraception or domestic-abuse shelters, became a tool in the Third Wave of Feminism, which made use of the internet to further enhance their movement.

One important aspect of this last wave of feminism is the issue of gender violence, which I will explain in the second chapter of this paper. It was the central issue of the Third Wave and it infringed upon white and non-white women; women of all classes and races came together to participate in this movement fighting for their rights. Postcolonial Feminism is another subcategory of feminism which focuses on non-white women or women from the colonies and tries to bring into light how so far feminism has solely focused on the experiences of women in Western cultures. It criticizes previous ideas of feminism because they generalized the experiences of all women.

#### 1.4.Black Feminism

Black Feminism aimed exclusively towards black women's rights, working in parallel with the previous waves of feminism. Within this group there were women of color

and third-world women who lent a voice towards legitimate criticism against Western Feminism for focusing only on themselves. The fact that black women were doubly marginalized based on their gender *and* race, became the most important factor for the emergence of Black Feminism.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Sojourner Truth, a black woman who achieved freedom after living in slavery became an important figure for Black Feminism. During the second annual convention of the women's rights movement in 1852 she gave a famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman", in which she called for the attention of black slave women by talking about her personal experiences. The reactions to her speech were diverse, some people criticized her and others became conscious of the situation. Despite being more affected by patriarchal oppression, black women were not taken into account during the First Wave of Feminism because of white women's racism. As Bell Hooks points out in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, "the 19<sup>th</sup> century women's rights movement could have provided a forum for black women to address their grievances, but white female racism barred them from full participation in the movement" (161). Besides, it may be said that white women defended their racist attitude by claiming that black women were only interested to work for the benefit of blacks while they were more oriented towards women and their rights. Black women then created only black women groups such the National Association for Colored Women in 1896, as a reaction against the discrimination they suffered.

Black and white women fought for their rights but in different ways and times. While blacks fought against poverty and prostitution, white women fought for education and charity. However, during the twentieth century both were involved in the Suffragist Movement. The issues of race and gender became connected but after the enfranchisement both strings of feminisms got separated again, forming Black Feminism and the Second

Wave of Feminism. While white women enjoyed their right to vote, black women suffered the consequences of a system of racial apartheid. During the 1930s black women's main focus was on racism, meanwhile, as I explained before, white women sought gender equality.

During the 1960s, many black women accepted their subordination as they believed that a "woman's role was that of a helpmate to her man" (Hooks 182). They assumed that supporting oppression could be good for the Black community because white women accepted it and they did not rebel against this abuse, so to look like them black women became more passive and tolerant towards patriarchy. After four decades, at the end of the twentieth century, all women fought for women's rights as a single unified voice without giving way to distinctions based on race or class. They all cooperated and participated in organizations and groups, and gradually they started to realize that each woman's experience was unique and they formed a stronger sisterhood by taking into consideration non-white women's concerns.

To sum up, these three Waves of Feminism were involved with women's issues although only the last wave focused more strongly on the issue of gender violence and the situation of women of color. The various different agendas in each wave are reflected in many literary works, such as Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Cleage's *Flyin' West*. The former was published in 1947, coinciding with the beginning of the Second Wave, while Cleage's play, *Flyin' West* was published in 1995 during the Third Wave of Feminism. Consequently, on the one hand, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams brings into focus the theme of violence by creating characters like Stella and Stanley, a dysfunctional couple where the woman despite being physically abused continues to stay with her aggressor. On the other, Pearl Cleage focuses on the themes of violence against

women based on racial prejudices and offers a solution in the form of resistance by creating a strong bond among black fearless women as portrayed by Sophie and Mrs. Leah.

## 2. A Historical Overview on Gender Violence

This chapter deals with the complex definition of gender violence. In a short introduction to this chapter I will explain the different terms related with women and violence, such as domestic violence, gender violence and sexist violence. Those terms have a lot of in common but they are used in different contexts. Gender and sexist violence refer to mistreatment by a male dominant authoritative figure against a woman considered a subordinate figure inferior by that man in lieu of her sex. However, domestic violence occurs in the familiar environment, and there is no reference to gender (the victims can be women, men, children or old women and men.)

In this chapter I will consider the theme of gender violence by explaining the causes, the types and the reactions to it by the victimized women. As noted before, it was during the Second Wave of Feminism when gender violence emerged as one of the important issues. Nevertheless, in order to interpret the roots of gender violence one must consider the constant presence of the dictates of the patriarchal order effective from several decades in the minds of the people and how it still continues to exist in the present day scenario. Patriarchal society, as the term itself suggests, is about a male supremacist society which leads to unjust treatment of women. For decades women have been considered the weaker sex and men have used this belief in order to further strengthen their dominant grasp on women. Patriarchy views woman as mere objects considering them men's property. As it is pointed out in the article of the United Nations "Ending Violence against Women: From Words to Action," "violence against women is a form of discrimination and a violation of

human rights . . . [it] stops them from fulfilling their potential, restricts economic growth and undermines development” (i).

In order to render women powerless, patriarchy deprives women of their freedom in all aspects of life, such as economic, social, sexual, etc. At the beginning, women are not able to identify the mistreatment because it starts slowly with the use of “control and isolation strategies” (39), as it is described in *161 respuestas sobre la violencia de género (desde el derecho constitucional, la sociología, la psicología y el derecho procesal)*. These strategies grow in intensity until they reach their peak in its violent form, physical abuse.

Mistreatment is a cycle that, according to Lenore Walker, has three “distinct phases associated with a recurring battering cycle: (1) tension-building accompanied with rising sense of danger, (2) the acute battering incident, and (3) loving-contrition” (91). During the first phase a drastic change occurs in the batterer’s behavior that the victim cannot explain. She usually believes that it is caused by stress and tension at work, or that it is the consequence of external issues rather than psychological or mental ones. In order to avoid this rage-inducing behavior of the man she tries to do her best and initially she mistakenly believes that she has the situation under control. Nevertheless, this first phase is the beginning of the psychological process of *learned helplessness*. This process is experienced by people who suffer harassment in their homes, and they are unable to reach a solution. As a consequence women are left trapped and helpless and become vulnerable targets of gender violence.

The second phase, the acute battering incident, reflects the increase in tension and the batterer attacks the victim verbally and physically. The figure of the police or the third person, who intercedes as an intermediary, appears in this phase. At the end of this stage the tension between both, the aggressor and the victim, is reduced, but the victim’s fear reaches alarmingly high levels.

The final stage is the one of regretting, which lacks tension. The batterer appears to be regretful and considerate towards the victim and tries to please her so that she forgives him and forgets the violence he inflicted on her in the previous stages and she thinks that the aggressive behavior of the batterer was a mistake and will never occur again. As Lenore Walker points out “the batterer himself may believe . . . that he will never allow to be violent again” (94). Battered women stay with their aggressor because most of the actions that took place during their courtship period occur again in this stage and women are won back, which is clearly illustrated by Stella’s behavior with Stanley in William’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* as it will be examined later.

## 2.1. Main Causes of Mistreatment.

In this section I will analyze the reasons given by men as justification for their abuse of women. The most obvious reason is the sexist ideology of men legitimizing the notion that women are inferior to men in all aspects. Men, therefore, with the belief that they are stronger and better, dominate women physically, financially and emotionally and consequently the women are bereft of any authority and power to operate as independent, free thinking individuals. As mentioned before, women try to explain this behavior but when dealing with this “causa estructural” (32) (structural cause), as it is defined in *161 respuestas sobre la violencia de género*, there are no arguments for men to stop their violent actions.

As the batterer’s aim is to deny women any effective power it is important to take into account that when a couple is not well educated or comes from a poor economic background, the woman is more vulnerable to attacks of gender violence because the man who lacks power in the outside world tries to negate its absence by asserting power on the woman. As William J. Goode claims “individuals lacking other means of power, such as



income or educational status, will be more likely to rely on violence to achieve greater power within the relationship” (636). Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Minnie in *Flyin’ West* fall into this category as it will be studied in next section. Nevertheless, culture and economic status are not only the causes of mistreatment, as neither is addiction to alcohol or drugs. As explained in *161 respuestas sobre la violencia de género* people tend to blame these external issues, and use them as an excuse to validate gender violence (57). Although, consumption of drugs and alcohol does affect the mental stability of the victimizer, their aggressive behavior arises more out of the general feeling of male superiority, which during the state of inebriation further heightens itself.

On the other hand, some men justify their behavior declaring psychological problems as the main cause, as Marta Fernández-Morales, Inmaculada Pineda-Hernández, *et al* claim in their essay on "Violence Against Women: Forms and Responses": “[Men] introduce the themes of jealousy and uncontrolled sexual desire as serious psychological factors” (22). These reasons are perfect examples of sexist thought, also the theme of jealousy, mentioned by William Stacey and Anson Shupe, “suggests that the man is consumed with fears of the woman’s promiscuity yet preoccupied with his own barely restrained sex drives” (50). Men hide their sexist thoughts using these psychological, and presumably *uncontrollable*, problems to keep on considering natural to see women as their property.

To end with, I argue that there is only one main cause of gender violence which is the men’s belief that women are inferior and therefore must be subordinated and controlled. In order to deny women any power men resort to the use of violence in various ways, which I will elaborate in the following section.

## 2.2.Different Types of Mistreatment.

As aforementioned, there are several types of violence that men use to make women powerless. These are physical, psychological, economic, social, ambient and sexual abuses.

The first one, physical abuse implies the use of force in order to cause bodily harm. As I have commented in the previous section physical violence takes place during the second phase of the cycle of violence. I refer to psychological abuse when the aggressor denies power to the victim by attacking her psychological and emotional integrity. The aggressor achieves his purpose of reducing the power of the victim and she experiences the process of *learned helplessness* and finally, she becomes a passive subject. If the batterer believes that his victim is still powerful he begins to use another type of violence: the third one, economic abuse, which deals with the intentional privatization of women's well-being resources. Furthermore, it aims at effective discrimination and segregation of women regarding access to shared resources. Men, therefore have control over women because they lack the resources necessary for their survival and so they become even more dependent and subordinate to him. Social mistreatment deals with the act of humiliation, shaming and mocking of the woman in public: ambient abuse refers to the damaging of objects which are of high sentimental or material value to the victim. And finally, the last form of violence is that of sexual abuse. It refers to forced sexual activity by one without the consent of the other. Alluding to the thoughts of a man who is clinging on to patriarchal ideas, the batterer uses this type of abuse to make the woman sexually submissive, and to reinforce the traditional definition of men as the superior sex and women as mother and wife, whose only aims in life are to bear and raise children and performing the tasks as expected of them within the framework of marriage, thereby adhering to the rules set for women by the male dominated society.

### 2.3. Women's Attitude Towards Mistreatment

As I have previously explained, in the third phase of the cycle defined by Lenore Walker as “loving-contrition” (91) the batterer tries to make the victim forget about the suffering caused by the abuse he had inflicted and he puts in his best efforts to have a peaceful reunion with his *beloved*. However, when this same cycle of violence is repeated several times, the victim realizes that nothing will change but she still continues to stay with her aggressor. The battered women usually believe that they cannot escape from the situation because as Michael J. Strube and Linda S. Barbour declare “both economic dependence and commitment were significant; and independently, related to decisions to leave an abusive relationship” (785). They are economically dependent on their male partners and furthermore, as mothers they do not want to abandon their children by walking out of the marriage.

The main reason why a woman remains in a relationship with the aggressor is the supposed economic dependence on her husband. I define it as *supposed* because, in my opinion, it is ironical for the victim to think that if she leaves her abusive husband her future will be uncertain and unpleasant, despite the fact that her present is not any better. She chooses to stay in an abusive relationship where at least the man supports her economically even though she has no power and freedom of her own. The prospect of not leaving the man is further diminished if the aggressor and the victim have children as the mother would not want to be separated from her children and therefore continues to suffer silently for their sake. The woman believes that separation from the aggressor is not in the best interest of the kids as Strube and Barbour have stated “traditional values suggest that being a wife and mother are the most important roles of a woman . . . and that one cannot be a full woman unless one is married” (786). Because of the presence of social prejudices, such as

traditional values of patriarchy, women keep on living together with their aggressor, suffering the abuse silently.

There was a time when the women too sincerely believed that they were born to please men and diligently obeyed the rules set by the society but over the past few decades, patriarchy is slowly but surely losing its stronghold. In the next chapter I will analyze how the authors Tennessee Williams and Pearl Cleage have treated the theme of gender violence in their plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Flyin' West*, respectively. Both plays deal with this issue set in different periods of time and from different perspectives, the first one from a white male perspective and the second one from a colored female perspective. In both plays we come across characters (Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Sophie in *Flyin' West*,) who fight against gender violence and see it as an inhuman and intolerable act. In addition to this, both authors have created submissive characters who get victimized (Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Minnie in *Flyin' West*) in order to make the reader conscious about the magnitude of the problem of violence. In the next chapter I will analyze the behavior of both brave and submissive characters and also the dominant male figures of the plays. All these characters will be analyzed according to the types, causes and consequences of mistreatment which I have commented on at the beginning of this section.

### 3. Various Forms of Gender Violence in American Plays – *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Flyin' West* (1995)

#### 3.1. The Subordination of Female Characters in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Published in 1947, at the beginning of the Second Wave of Feminism, this American play is one of the first to deal with the issue of gender violence in the United

States and it shows how abused women in a domestic setting are unable to actively engage in any kind of resistance due to their inferior and powerless status within the patriarchal structure. American playwright Tennessee Williams illustrates this delicate situation by creating two female characters, Stella Kowalski and Blanche DuBois, and both are shown to be victims of gender inequality. For Williams, “frustration is the surface evidence of the predicament of his female characters” (Blackwell 9). In this play the issue of frustration is related with the problem of gender violence because Stella has to decide whether she should continue to stay with Stanley Kowalski, her aggressor, or to break with him and live with her sister, who too has been abused by Stanley and is depressed due to her loneliness. In this section I will analyze the attitude of these two female characters in relation to Stanley’s aggressive and abusive character.

Stanley Kowalski is the male protagonist of the play, and right at the beginning of the play he is described as:

Medium height, about five eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women . . . [he has] the *power and the pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens* . . . he sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications. (128. Emphasis added)

With this description of Stanley, we are immediately able to identify him as a dominating character who only sees women as mere sexual objects whose sole purpose, according to him, is to provide him pleasure in whichever way he wants. He is also violent, aggressive and insensitive to the women characters around him; whom he constantly attempts to control, using his power as a man.

The analysis of Stanley Kowalski’s character is a good way to understand the cycle of violence –previously commented upon in the second chapter. During the first phase, as

referred to by Lenore Walker, we see “tension-building accompanied with rising sense of danger” (91), Stanley would have experienced a change in his behavior but in the play this change does not appear. The second phase, talks about the aggressor’s attack on his victim due to an increase in tension and in the case of this play, the victim, Stella expresses her desire to abandon this abusive relationship: “I want to go away, I want to go away” (152). After the episode of physical abuse, the abuser seemingly appears to go through a stage of repentance; he feels sorry for his actions and becomes submissive, *lending the power* to the victim in order to be forgiven. This is the beginning of the third phase and I quote from the play: “[Stanley] falls on his knees . . . and presses his face to her belly. Her eyes go blind with tenderness as she catches his head and raises him level with her” (154). At the beginning of the last phase, the abuser, with his act of meekness, successfully gets the victim to forgive him. The abuser is usually forgiven when such an incident happens for the first time but with the repetition of the cycle of violence the victim gradually loses hopes but still finds it difficult to leave the man, regardless of his inhuman behavior.

The character of Stella Kowalski is that of a typical submissive woman functioning as per the norms of patriarchy. She suffers gender violence but stays on with her aggressor, Stanley, her husband. She has no friends of her own and is completely dependent on Stanley and silently faces the humiliation which he inflicts on her in front of his friends. Sometimes in the play she rebels but without success, against the aggressive behavior of Stanley: “This is my house and I’ll talk as much as I want to” (147). Although she rises up against Stanley, she is unable to let go because she is in love with him, as she says referring to him: “When [Stanley’s] away for a week I nearly go wild . . . and when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby...” (125). She feels she cannot live without him and, in my opinion, she seems incapable of raising a baby on her own. As explained in the second chapter, Stella exemplifies the two main causes as to how the victim is tied to the aggressor,

i.e her financial dependence on him and her concern for her children. Stella is subjected to various kinds of abuse as Stanley continues to increase the nature of his violence depending on the given situation of his victim. She suffers physical, psychological, social, and economic abuse. As commented above, Stella is physically attacked during the second phase of the cycle of violence and then Stanley verbally attacks her ego claiming: “What do you two [Stella and Blanche] think you are? A pair of queens? . . . I am the king around here, so don’t forget it” (194). Stella also suffers social abuse because she is ridiculed in front of Stanley’s friends. Besides, Stella depends economically on Stanley who “does not give [her] a regular allowance” (161). She defends her husband’s behavior and at times even covers it up with the excuse of addiction: “When men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen” and “he was as good as a lamb when I came back and he’s really very, very ashamed of himself” (157). To sum up, Stella comes across as a submissive character who, according to Louise Blackwell, “subordinates herself to [Stanley’s] way of life because they have a satisfying sexual relationship” (11). Furthermore, her lack of power which leads to her dependence on Stanley turns her into a victim who cannot escape from her aggressor.

The next character I attempt to analyze is Blanche DuBois, Stella’s sister who appears to be the antithesis of her sister. It can be said that in certain aspects Blanche’s personality is similar to that of Stanley’s, as Anca Vlasopolos points out: “Critics have noted astonishing similarities between these two antagonists . . . their charged sexual presence, their tendency to aggrandize themselves” (326). The character of Blanche is strong yet insecure. Consumed by loneliness, she looks for male company in order to gain, what appears to be a sense of security which she terms as “protection”: “Intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with...I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection” (205). This can be noted as

the first example of how she is similar to Stanley: both of them actively engage in seeking sexual gratification. The next similarity would be how they both have strong personalities when Blanche's powerful personality confronts and clashes with Stanley's dominant one. Blanche is even domineering with her sister. According to her, Stella is living in a city that is too primitive for Blanche; she is confident and not afraid of Stanley: "Beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart – and I have all of those things – aren't taken away, but grow! . . . When I have all of these treasures locked in my heart I think of myself as a very, very rich woman!" (211). Right from the beginning of the play Blanche constantly works towards undermining Stanley's power and disinvesting his authoritarian status, since she is not as submissive as Stella; Stanley cannot bear the loss of his power or territory and attacks Blanche verbally and physically, by raping her. Despite the aforementioned similarities shared by Blanche and Stanley they are fundamentally different on moral and humanist grounds. Blanche cannot tolerate the violent and primitive behavior of her brother-in-law: "I'm terrified...I'm not used to such...violence!" (155). Blanche does not understand why her sister allows Stanley to behave the way he does and how she can continue to love him and live with him.

In the end, Stanley manages to hold on to his power by maintaining his relationship with Stella and effectively getting rid of Blanche, who was seen a contesting force to his authority and therefore a threat which needed to be dealt with and removed. In this play, Tennessee Williams illustrates the issue of gender violence without giving a solution for the victim, who continues to suffer; because the only character in the play who does protest (Blanche) is silenced by rape. It may be noted that rape is never about sexual desires but about assertion of power and has always been one of the vilest instruments used by men to prove their authority over women.



### 3.2. Female Solidarity Against Male Oppression in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*.

Pearl Cleage's play is set in 1898, during the First Wave of Feminism, although it was published in 1995 at the time of the Third Wave of Feminism when black women's rights finally emerged as important concerns. In her play, the author, herself an African-American female author, deals with the themes of racial and gender discrimination because black women are doubly marginalized in terms of their race and gender. Female characters in this play, such as Sophie, Minnie, Fannie and Mrs. Leah, fight for their rights together as a community, presenting a solution to the harassment as opposed to William's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In an interview with Jocelyn S. Zachery, Pearl Cleage stated: "I think that most of my work is very deeply rooted in community, in trying to say whatever the problem is we all together, we can fix it" (9:04). Cleage is a black feminist writer who is deeply concerned with women's issues, I believe that through this play she wants to give courage and hope to the victims of gender violence by portraying characters who despite of facing discrimination on the basis of being black and female still manage to free themselves out of the violent situation.

First of all I am going to analyze the male dominant figure in this play, Frank. He is arrogant and believes himself to be superior to everyone and more so to women, because he is a famous poet in London. Frank is only interested in being famous and remaining the sole authoritarian figure by negating everyone else's rights and voices around him. Despite being a mulatto, he hates black people and aspires to be a white man in order not to be marginalized. His wife, Minnie, is a black woman who has been manipulated by Frank in order to be the perfect woman in terms of what a *perfect woman* means to him, which is *white*, submissive and tolerant, as he points out in the play: "When I first took Minnie to London, I made sure to take her shopping before I introduced her to my friends. But I always knew she had potential" (50). As he hates black people he cannot tolerate his friends

judging him for having a black wife therefore he makes Minnie behave and dress like a white woman.

Frank is a typical abuser who attacks women in order to assert his power, even though he lacks it in the outside world. In the play when he loses all his money in a bet he beats Minnie. This assertion of masculine power is a form of self-consolation for his actual state of powerlessness. At the beginning of their relationship, like all domestic abusers, Frank is kind and gentle to Minnie because he wants to win her heart and more importantly, her confidence. Shortly after that, Frank's behavior changes, as Minnie claims: "He was mad all the time" (61). Then, he starts the cycle of violence without Minnie noticing it. The second phase of violence occurs before Frank meets his sisters-in-law, Sophie and Fannie, as we are told that Minnie already has a bruise. Minnie, like most victims, wants to believe that Frank's violent behavior is something temporary: "I used to think it must be a dream and that I'd wake up one day and Frank would be the way he used to be" (61). During the third phase, as previously commented, the abuser becomes gentle and tame and once he is forgiven the cycle starts all over again with more violence than before, as Minnie says "I can't make him stop...hitting me!" (74). Fortunately, in this play, we discover that the presence of the family, especially Sophie, plays a significant role in curtailing the domestic violence faced by Minnie.

Minnie's elder sister, Sophie, is brave and rebellious, she fights for the enfranchisement of black people and she wants to create a city with no white people because she does not want to be racially discriminated. Although both Sophie and Blanche do not tolerate gender violence, Sophie is more courageous and is more headstrong about what she wants to achieve. She is proud of what she is and she will do everything in her power to get what she wants and believes in. She says: "Two things I'm sure of. I don't want no white folks tellin' me what to do all day, and no man tellin' me what to do all

night” (21). She is self-confident and independent and she does not need anyone but herself: “The day I need somebody else to defend my land and my family is the day *that* somebody’s will be on the deed” (77). Furthermore, she cannot tolerate Minnie’s submissive behavior towards Frank and his violent behavior towards her sister. Freda Scott, commenting on Frank’s behavior states: “Frank, through his verbally and physically abusive behavior, threatens not only Minnie’s life, but the homestead itself” (710). Since Sophie sees Frank as a danger to the black community and by extension, to her family, she decides that he can no longer be a part of it and therefore with the help of Mrs. Leah, a black woman who was formerly a slave, she tries to make Minnie understand the politics behind gender violence and power-play claiming that “a man that will hit a woman once will hit her again” (70) and encourages her to leave him. But, despite their efforts, when Minnie is unable to abandon her husband, Sophie and Mrs. Leah, start to look for a different solution.

Sophie’s sisters, Fannie and Minnie, are quiet, submissive and both are shown to be tolerant towards gender violence. Minnie is a victim, who protects her aggressor’s behavior and is resigned to it. She makes excuses on Frank’s behavior to defend him: “Sometimes Frank says things in a way that...that doesn’t sound like how I know he means them” (44). Despite being physically and emotionally abused she defends Frank because she depends on him financially, and wants to continue living the life he offers her in London. Moreover, we are told that she is going to have a baby. Frank uses violence against Minnie on her account of being black, and since he hates blacks, he finds it hard to live with the fact that his wife belongs to the same race he despises so much: “You’re too black to bring me any good luck. All [black people] got to give is misery. Pure D misery and little black pickaninnies just like you” (55). Minnie’s lack of authority stops her to rebel against

Frank's abusive character, and when she refuses to do something in favor of her husband, as is the sign of the deed, Frank resorts to physically abusing her.

Apart from Minnie, her sister Fannie also defends the abuser alluding to the violence suffered by her mother and thereby insinuating that since physical abuse is faced by most women, wives must learn to accept it as a part of their domestic lives as Fannie states: "[Fannie's father] didn't like what [Fannie's mother] was saying, and then he got up real fast and grabbed her arm and he just shook her and shook her . . . we have to understand and be patient" (62). Fannie defends her father's violent attitude towards her mother who, in Fannie's opinion, was supposed to be quiet and tolerant. By defending her father, Fannie also justifies her brother-in-law's behavior throughout the play but she changes by the end and participates in giving Frank a piece of poisoned apple pie, hence becoming the active agent of the plan hatched by Mrs. Leah and Sophie to finish with the aggressor.

To sum up, in this play Pearl Cleage, though extreme, presents us with a solution for gender violence and racial discrimination. As it is said in the play: "[Minnie] approaches the body slowly . . . realizing the enormity of what they have done" (82). The *solution* is something which is reached at and executed by the coming together of women characters and therefore emphasizing the importance of female solidarity in the face of racial and gender violence and discrimination.

The two plays analyzed in this paper deal with the issue of gender violence in different periods of time. William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* reflects upon the thought processes and concerns prevalent at the time of the First Wave of Feminism whereas Cleage's *Flyin' West*, written during the Third Wave, shows a women's collective resistance against patriarchy and in doing so gives hope to victimized women.

## CONCLUSION

The two North American plays analyzed in this paper, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Flyin' West*, show two different approaches towards gender violence in terms of depiction of the issue and the response of the victimized women towards it. The plays also try to fulfill the goal of making the audience aware of gender inequality and discrimination.

The author of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams, illustrates how despite being in a highly physically and emotionally abusive relationship, the woman continues to live with her abuser and is forever relegated to a position which is inferior to her male counterpart and therefore entailing her dependency and submission to him. We are introduced to Blanche as opposed to her submissive sister Stella. Blanche is shown to have a strong personality and she resists Stanley's authoritarian nature but ultimately she is also silenced for trying to rebel against the patriarchal structure of her society. She is raped by Stanley and is left powerless. Stella, Stanley's wife, could leave him, but due to her economic dependency and her pregnancy she decides to stay on with her victimizer. With this ending, the author makes the audience think what happens when women are devoid of any power and are only expected to fit into their roles as obedient wives and mothers so much so that their identity is only limited to the functions they are meant to serve within the codified patriarchal framework.

On the other hand, Pearl Cleage, a black feminist writer and the author of *Flyin' West*, deals with the theme of gender violence along with racial discrimination; which were two important issues in the Third Wave of Feminism. The time when the Third Wave took place coincides with the date of publication of the play (1995). As opposed to Williams, Cleage shows a solution to gender violence by insisting on the power of collective resistance of women and the importance of it in the face of physical and mental domestic abuse. The women in the play work actively to put an end to the abuse inflicted by the

racist and masochist husband. Cleage's female characters face and overcome two types of discrimination: gender and racial; they rebel against the patriarchal structure and are successful at attaining their goal of freeing Minnie from the dominating clutches of Frank. Withstanding and finally overcoming these abusive situations they give out a message of hope to all those women who find themselves in dysfunctional and abusive relationships and are victims of domestic and racial violence.

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